

## Illicit Domains:

### Homage to Silvina Ocampo in Alejandra Pizarnik's Works\*

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This essay posits the hypothesis that in addition to personal affective ties, which were revealed with the publication of part of their correspondence,<sup>1</sup> there were also strong connections between the works of Alejandra Pizarnik and those of Silvina Ocampo. There are moments when that relationship is made explicit – a review, a title of a poem, a few dedications – but the homage to Ocampo in Pizarnik's work is also a blurry presence in other areas. It is useful to think of *La condesa sangrienta* not only in relation to Valentine Penrose's book, or to Borges's *Historia universal de la infamia* – two models that have garnered critical attention – but also to the stories from *La furia* (1959). It is useful to think of Pizarnik's poetic projects, quite different on the surface from those by Ocampo, in part as an homage to the poetry of her friend and precursor. And it is also useful to think of what Ocampo might represent for Pizarnik in the Argentine literary landscape – her differences from other women writers, the strangeness of her works – as something productive in her own creative processes.

The review Pizarnik wrote in 1967 (which was published the following year in *Sur*) of *El pecado mortal*, an anthology of Ocampo's short stories that the

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<sup>1</sup> Pizarnik's letters to Ocampo were published, at least in part, in *Correspondencia Pizarnik*, the volume compiled by Ivonne Bordelois in 1998. Bordelois notes: "De todas las cartas de este epistolario, éstas son las únicas donde la amistad rápidamente asciende a pasión y se enciende en ella" (190) [Of all the letters from this epistolary exchange, these are the only ones where friendship quickly ascends to passion and ignites]. The most notable letter is the last, dated January 31, 1972 (210–12). See also Piña's biography (especially 162–64). Regarding Pizarnik's sexuality, see Mariana Enriquez's note, "La poeta sangrienta."

publishing house Centro Editor de América Latina distributed with a prologue by José Bianco, is notable because it initiated (with Bianco's text) the serious study of Ocampo. Pizarnik's review, titled "Dominios ilícitos," speaks of the "extrema concentración" of Ocampo's stories, the "insumisión a los esquemas del relato," her "reserva delicada" and the use of ambiguity (Pizarnik, *Obras completas* 252) [extreme concentration ... rebellion against the short story schemas ... delicate reserve], as well as the "modo de hacer visibles las pasiones infantiles" (253) [manner of making visible infantile passions]. She mentions her delicate humor (255) and her preference for unexpected perspectives:

Como puede comprobarse, la autora no intenta poner en tela de juicio la noción de realidad. Pero, por las dudas, prefiere que los hechos más normales sean transmitidos por "puntos de vista" de la estirpe de la enanita muerta de risa (de "El vestido de terciopelo"). (254)

[As one can attest, the author does not try to question the notion of reality. But, just in case, she prefers that the most normal actions be transmitted through "points of view" like that of the laughing dwarf (in "El vestido de terciopelo").]

It is of special interest how Pizarnik discusses the "dialéctica del desamparo y del humor" [dialectic of helplessness and humor] in Ocampo (Evelyn Fishburn brilliantly comments on this aspect in Mackintosh and Posso 38), because that dialectic can be discovered in some areas of her own writing (I am thinking, for instance, of "La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la polígrafa"). That is, she perceives in Ocampo's works something that also characterizes her – at least in part – as a writer. I do not believe that we are dealing here with an influence, since the review is rather late in her production, and this facet had been manifested already in its own form, but it is the recognition of an affinity with Ocampo's singular work.

There have been some interesting discussions in the last few years about self-writing and the many ways it is achieved. Clearly Pizarnik is a strong case of a writer who constructs a "figure of the author," to use one of the terms that has been introduced. The "figure" she invented was novel, and for that reason it caught the attention of many other writers and critics. In regard to models of self-fashioning, it is evident that Pizarnik forges an original figure, very different from some of the existing models (let us recall some figurations of the woman writer: Victoria Ocampo, Alfonsina Storni, Gabriela Mistral). It is here, I believe, that there is a possible hidden connection with Silvina Ocampo, another writer who invented a totally original form of self-writing for the time, even though critics have been late to recognize this (much later than in Pizarnik's case). That is, Pizarnik was one of the first to have recognized the uniqueness and originality of Ocampo's works.

A text that shows another side of Pizarnik's admiration for Ocampo's works

is the poem "A un poema acerca del agua, de Silvina Ocampo" [On a poem about water by Silvina Ocampo]. It has a dedication "A Silvina y a la condesa de Trípoli" [To Silvina and the Countess of Tripoli] and an epigraph by Octavio Paz (from *Piedra del sol*): "que emana toda la noche profecías" [which emanates prophecies all night long].

Tu modo de silenciarte en el poema.  
Me abris como a una flor  
(sin duda una flor pobre, lamentable)  
que ya no esperaba la terrible delicadeza  
de la primavera. Me abris, me abro,  
me vuelvo de agua en tu poema de agua  
que emana toda la noche profecías.  
(*Poesía completa* 356)

[Your way of silencing yourself in the poem.  
You open me up like a flower  
(without a doubt a poor, lamentable flower)  
that no longer hoped for the terrible delicacy  
of spring. You open me up, I open up,  
I turn to water in your water poem  
that emanates prophesies all night long.]

This poem, unpublished during Pizarnik's lifetime, is printed in the Lumen edition with the following note by Ana Becció: "Hojita mecanografiada y corregida por AP, sin fecha" [Page typed and corrected by AP, no date]. This text is intriguing for various reasons, as already noted by Susana Chávez Silverman (Mackintosh and Posso 17–19). First, it is difficult to know which of the many Silvina Ocampo poems about water this poem honors, especially since we don't know the date of Pizarnik's poem. The fact that the epigraph and the final verse belong to Octavio Paz and not Ocampo also does not help much in this respect. However, I have a good candidate: the poem "Para el agua" from *Amarillo celeste*, published in 1972, the year of Pizarnik's death. This poem was certainly written some time between the publication of *Lo amargo por dulce* in 1962 and *Amarillo celeste* ten years later, in other words, during the years of greatest intimacy between the two poets.<sup>2</sup> Ocampo's poem reads:

<sup>2</sup> Another possible intertext is "Amar" from *Amarillo celeste*, which ends with these notable lines: "Ah, me hubiera gustado ser la helada/ agua tragando tu garganta ardiente/ como un ángel en furia, puramente./ ¡Heroica ambición de ser tragada!" [Ah, I would have liked to be the frozen/ water drinking your parched throat/ like an angel in fury, purely./ Heroic ambition to be swallowed!] (*Poesía completa* II 169).

Estoy hablando al agua que es espejo:  
 "Como a una madre yo amo al universo  
 que me hubiera abrazado al despertar,  
 que me trajera cestos de duraznos,  
 caminos y estaciones y abanicos.  
 Dentro de algunas piedras muy preciosas  
 veo brillar tus ínfimos paisajes,  
 tus personas que mueren o que nacen.  
 Hasta el crimen por eso me da lástima  
 y la insolencia misma me entenece.  
 Te contemplo alejándote en el río.  
 ¡Y daría mi vida por la tuya  
 imaginando tu llegada al mar  
 desnuda, impersonal y aun tan mía  
 formando parte como yo del mundo!"

(*Poesía completa* II 194)

[I am speaking to the water that is a mirror:  
 "I love the universe like a mother  
 who would have embraced me upon waking,  
 brought me baskets of peaches,  
 pathways and seasons and fans.  
 Inside some very precious stones I see your tiny landscapes shine,  
 your people who die or are born.  
 For that reason I feel pity even for crime  
 and insolence itself moves me.  
 I gaze at you as you sail away down the river.  
 And I would give my life for yours  
 imagining your arrival at the sea  
 nude, impersonal, and still so mine  
 forming part of this world as much as I!"]

If this is the poem Pizarnik glossed in her own, "Tu modo de silenciarte en el poema" [your way of silencing yourself in the poem] refers specifically to the manner in which Ocampo turns into a poetic voice whose words, cited in the last fourteen lines of the poem, have something impersonal and hieratic about them: in a certain way the poetic "I" of the poem is reduced to the voice of the first line, which says: "Estoy hablando al agua que es espejo" [I am speaking to the water that is a mirror]. At the same time, the splitting of the poetic "I" produces a strange splitting of the addressee, which is and is not the sea: there is a "you" in the last four lines which reaches the sea, and which is "desnuda, impersonal y aun tan mía" [nude, impersonal, and still so mine]. That nudity ("desnudez") and that impersonality are also in Pizarnik's poem, where the poetic voice opens "como una flor/ (sin duda una flor pobre, lamentable)" [like

a flower/ (without a doubt a poor, lamentable flower)] and then repeats "Me abris, me abro" [You open me up, I open up]: that is, the nude "I" is poor and lamentable, opened up by another, but at the same time, opens up herself. The sexual act is also suggested in the penultimate line, "me vuelvo de agua en tu poema de agua" [I turn to water in your water poem], which suggests that the poetic "I" recognizes herself in the "you" of Ocampo's poem.

The epigraph and the Paz quote are intriguing. We know that Paz greatly admired Ocampo as well as Pizarnik, and that both of them admired him, but these flowery gestures (even if they are poor and lamentable) in the form of quoting him do not cease to be strange. Even stranger is the fact that the quotation is wrong: Paz says "mana," and not "emana." The first stanza of his famous long poem reads:

un sauce de cristal, un chopo de agua,  
 un alto surtidor que el viento arquea,  
 un árbol bien plantado más danzante,  
 un caminar de río que se curva,  
 avanza, retrocede, da un rodeo  
 y llega siempre: un caminar tranquilo  
 de estrella o primavera sin premura,  
 agua que con los párpados cerrados  
 mana toda la noche profecías,  
 unánime presencia en oleaje,  
 ola tras ola hasta cubrirlo todo,  
 verde soberanía sin ocaso  
 como el deslumbramiento de las alas  
 cuando se abren en mitad del cielo

(*Poemas* 259–60)

[a crystal willow, a poplar of water,  
 a tall fountain the wind arches over,  
 a tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,  
 a course of a river that turns, moves on,  
 doubles back, and comes full circle,  
 forever arriving: the calm course  
 of the stars or an unhurried spring,  
 water with eyes closed welling over  
 with oracles all night long,  
 a single presence in a surge of waves,  
 wave after wave till it covers all,  
 a reign of green that knows no decline,  
 like the flash of wings unfolding in the sky]<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Eliot Weinberger. (translator's note)

That is, this stanza from Paz's poem is also a poem about water and an opening that is produced in water. The "profecías" in the tenth line can be linked to Pizarnik's poem in her way of making her own Paz's and Ocampo's verses, while also converting them into something new. Pizarnik's error in quoting Paz not only adds an additional syllable to Paz's hendecasyllable line but also alters its meaning: "manar" [to well or to overflow] suggests a spontaneous action, whereas "emanar" [to emanate], especially when it is linked to "profecías" [prophecies or oracles], implies communication. I believe that is why Pizarnik mistakes or alters the line: she is using Paz's verse to *interpellate* Ocampo's poem (and perhaps its author). The intertextual game is delicate and complex, with that "terrible delicadeza/ de la primavera" [terrible delicateness/ of spring] from Pizarnik's poem, violent and sudden.

Another poem by Pizarnik that she dedicated to Ocampo has the title "... Al alba venid ..." [Come at daybreak], with an ellipsis before and after the three words of the title. The quote is from an anonymous villancico:

Al alba venid, buen amigo,  
al alba venid.  
Amigo el que yo más quería,  
venid al alba del día.  
Amigo el que yo más amaba,  
venid a la luz del alba.  
Venid a la luz del día,  
non traigáis compañía.  
Venid a la luz del alba,  
non traigáis gran compañía.

[Come at daybreak, sweet friend,  
come at daybreak.  
Friend whom I love the best,  
come at the dawn of day.  
Friend whom I love above all,  
come at the break of dawn.  
Come at the break of day,  
but bring no company.  
Come at the dawn of day,  
bring little company.]<sup>4</sup>

This Spanish poem is related to the Galician-Portuguese tradition of the *cantigas de amigo* [songs of friends and of love], and to the Mozarabic jarchas; it is thought to date from the fifteenth century. Pizarnik's version has a dedication "A Silvina Ocampo," and later says:

<sup>4</sup> Translation by Gerald Brenan. (translator's note)

al viento no lo escuchéis,  
al viento.  
toco la noche,  
a la noche no la toquéis,  
al alba,  
voy a partir,  
al alba no partáis, al alba  
voy a partir. (Poesía completa 443)

[do not listen to the wind,  
to the wind.  
I touch the night,  
do not touch the night,  
at daybreak,  
I will go,  
do not go at daybreak, at daybreak  
I will go.]

Once again, here we see complex work with an intertext, since instead of coming at dawn, the poetic voice declares her intention of leaving at daybreak. The repetitions in the anonymous villancico echo in Pizarnik's poem, while the use of "vosotros," in the title as much as in the poem, inscribes the peninsular tradition of the jarchas and *cantigas* in the poem. At the same time, it radically transforms the medieval poem, converting it from a lover's monologue into a possible dialogue. One could rewrite it as follows:

A: al viento no lo escuchéis,  
B: al viento,  
toco la noche,  
A: a la noche no la toquéis,  
B: al alba,  
voy a partir,  
A: al alba no partáis,  
B: al alba  
voy a partir.

[A: do not listen to the wind  
B: to the wind.  
I touch the night  
A: do not touch the night  
B: at daybreak,  
I will go  
A: do not go at daybreak  
B: at daybreak  
I will go.]

This transforms the discursive situation from the *cantigas de amigo*, monologues that invite the reader/listener to imagine the object of desire and noted for their gender-sexual ambiguity, a theme explored by the Mexican poet Abigael Bohórquez in his modern *cantigas* with a homoerotic theme, as I have commented elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

In the Pizarnik archives at Princeton there is a typed version of this poem, with another title and with some minimal but important differences in terms of the division of the lines that, as I indicated before, can be read as a dialogue. The title is "Simple comme una phrase musicale," and the same dedication appears (but in lower case, "a Silvina Ocampo"). This version reads as follows:

al viento no lo escuchéis  
 al viento  
                   toco la noche  
 a la noche no la toquéis  
                   al alba  
 no partáis  
                   al alba  
 voy a partir

[do not listen to the wind  
 to the wind  
                   I touch the night  
 do not touch the night  
                   at daybreak  
 do not go  
                   at daybreak  
 I will go]

The title could refer to the musicalized version of the anonymous villancico, but the reason as to why it is written in French is unclear to me. What is noticeable is that the text included in *Textos de sombra* alters the place where the first iteration of "al alba" [at daybreak] appears and it adds the phrase "voy a partir" [I will go] which is repeated once more at the end.<sup>6</sup>

Pizarnik, therefore, establishes a dialogue with Ocampo at different moments in her work, and I imagine that there must be many more examples that are not as explicit as those which I mention here. At any rate, what draws our attention is the power Ocampo represents for Pizarnik as a model for a woman writer. In Pizarnik's chaotic papers in Princeton there are other remains of their

<sup>5</sup> See "Never Say I," 337-9. (translator's note)

<sup>6</sup> Since *Textos de sombra* is a posthumous book, published in 1982, I do not know if the editors consulted another version of the poem, handwritten or typed, or if the differences are due to errors of transcription.

relationship. To conclude, I will cite a fragment from a letter from Severo Sarduy to Pizarnik, dated November 24, 1969. Sarduy tells her, undoubtedly commenting on something Pizarnik had mentioned in an earlier letter:

Ah, conocía y *admiraba* ya la obra de Silvina O. Sin duda fuerte, bien imbricada y con algo de cáustico, de agresivo solapadamente, de agujita metida en curare ... sí: su escritura es una araña pollito por dentro de una caja inglesa (decorada por Gainsborough, of course) de chocolatines, algo así. Me gusta, suscita mi complicidad, en estos tiempos de *littérature au ventre*, de tripitas expuestas, de agresividad sin freno, esa "elegancia," o casi diría, si la palabra no estuviera tan desvalorizada, ese pudor. Ahora, el problema es radical: no hay nada que hacer en el mundo editorial parisino, o al menos en el que está a mi alcance, por un libro de cuentos (me parece que S.O. es una autora de cuentos), no hay transposición editorial con ese género en París: sabrás por experiencia que aquí un libro de poemas, o uno de cuentos, por buenos que sean, están condenados a la gaveta. No obstante, con la ayuda de Alberto Manguel, que también disfruta de lo que hace S. vamos a emprender una pequeña cruzada, más bien del lado de Nadeau, etc. Veremos ...

[Ah, I was familiar with and already *admired* Silvina O.'s work. Without a doubt strong, very imbricated and somewhat caustic, covertly aggressive, like a needle dipped in curare ... yes: her writing is a tarantula inside an English chocolate box (decorated by Gainsborough, of course), something like that. I like it, it elicits my complicity, in these times of *littérature au ventre*, of exposed innards, of unchecked aggressiveness, that "elegance," or I would almost say, if that word were not so devalued, that modesty. Now, the problem is radical: there is nothing to be done with the Parisian publishing world, or at least with the one that is within my reach, with a book of short stories (I think S.O. is an author of short stories), there is no publishing transposition with that genre in Paris: you must know from experience that here a book of poems, or one of stories, as good as they may be, are condemned to the drawer. Nevertheless, with the help of Alberto Manuel, who also enjoys what S. does, we are about to embark on a small crusade, but rather on the side of Nadeau, etc. We shall see ... ]

That "small crusade" would be successful: *Faits divers de la terre et du ciel*, an anthology of Ocampo's stories in French translation, was subsequently published by Gallimard, but only in 1974, two years after Pizarnik's death, and with the help of Héctor Bianciotti, not Sarduy.<sup>7</sup> It is a pleasure to see that she modestly contributed to Ocampo's fame, even though the first glimpses of that

<sup>7</sup> I thank Silvia Baron Supervielle for clarification regarding this detail.

fame arrived too late for her to know that her efforts had not been in vain.

In the 2003 edition of Pizarnik's diary, there are many annotations about Ocampo, some enthusiastic, "Es la única persona de Argentina que me inspira confianza" (428) [She is the only person in Argentina who inspires my confidence], others less so, "pacto a lo Sade-Masoch pero tácito" (429) [a pact like that of Sade-Masoch, but tacit]. On many occasions she compares herself to Ocampo, at times with her husband, such as when she considers them "representantes de la literatura tradicional" (464) [representatives of traditional literature] or when she says: "S. estará en mis funerales. Por eso no logro evitar, a veces, el sentirme más vieja y –¿cómo decirlo?– más experimentada que ella" (429) [S. will be at my funeral. That's why I cannot avoid, sometimes, feeling older and – how can I put it? – more experienced than she]. As Suzanne Chávez Silverman notes, in the diaries at Princeton there is an entry on January 2, 1970 where she retracts the praise she published in "Dominios ilícitos" in *Sur* (Mackintosh and Posso 9), an entry that is transcribed in the expanded 2013 edition on pages 924–5. At any rate, it is still significant that the 1971 diary ends thus: "Alegria al recibir los cuadernos que me regaló Silvina" (498) [Happy to have received the notebooks that Silvina sent me].

*Translated by Fernanda Zullo-Ruiz*